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FM AMEMBASSY BAKU  
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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 0841  
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000195

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/05/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [KPAO](#) [KIRF](#) [IR](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: PROFILE OF IRANIAN-EDUCATED AZERBAIJANI SHIA CLERIC

REF: A. BAKU 00094

[¶](#)B. 07 BAKU 01069

[¶](#)C. 07 BAKU 01043

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Don Lu for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶](#)11. (C) Summary: While most Azerbaijani clerics espouse moderate religious and political views, the Embassy has been developing a relationship with one Shia cleric trained in Qom, Iran who espouses anti-Israeli and pro-Hezbollah rhetoric. Haji Namik Babahanov was the head imam at a local Baku mosque until his failed 2005 Parliamentary campaign; now he runs an NGO promoting awareness of civil rights and serves as an imam at an unregistered mosque in Mashtaga. Namik is representative of the thin strata of foreign-trained clerics who harbor political views that run counter to the generally pro-Western views held by the majority of Azerbaijan's population. End Summary.

[¶](#)12. (C) This cable is the second of a broader series profiling Azerbaijani clerics. Ref a was the first in the series, which profiled a popular Baku Shia cleric, whose moderate views -- but willingness to criticize the government's religious policy -- grant him credibility among Baku Shias.

[¶](#)13. (C) Haji Namik Babahanov appears to fit the profile of a Shia cleric whose views lean toward the radical end of the spectrum, especially in the broader Azerbaijani context. The Embassy cautions against generalizing from this profile because the overwhelming preponderance of clerics we know would reject his political views.

Who is Haji Namik?

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[¶](#)14. (C) Haji Namik probably is in his mid-30s, and he works in Baku, while residing in the conservative Absheron village of Mashtaga. Namik studied theology in Qom, Iran, where he appears to have picked up some of his anti-Israeli and anti-American views. From 1997 - 2005, he was the head imam at the Javad Mosque in one of Baku's more traditional neighborhoods. According to Namik, the authorities forced him to step down from this position after he tried to run in the 2005 Parliamentary elections. (According to Azerbaijani law, one cannot be an active cleric and simultaneously hold political office.) Namik believes Islamic values should play a greater role in Azerbaijan's political system, but he has not articulated a more sophisticated political philosophy in

his meetings with us.

NGO Head

¶5. (C) Currently, Haji Namik runs an NGO called "Toward Perfectionism," which aims to educate Azerbaijani citizens about their political and human rights. Namik noted that while the NGO is open to working with believers and non-believers, the NGO works primarily with Muslim believers.

The NGO publishes two newspapers, both of which probably have limited circulation. Namik also claimed that the NGO, which is based in Baku, has satellite offices in several regions. (Comment: NGO offices in Azerbaijan often consist of nothing more than a cold office, teapot, desk, and maybe a computer that could be purchased third-hand at an American yard sale for USD 10.) Namik said he has tried to register his NGO four times with the Ministry of Justice, but with no success. Namik said he knows and has worked a few times with religious activist Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, but he did not indicate that there are any close ties between the two activists.

¶6. (S/NF) Namik is outspokenly critical of the GOAJ's religious policies. His primary complaints are that the GOAJ harasses pious Muslim believers and seeks to monopolize the distribution of religious knowledge, both by appointing clerics and controlling Islamic literature. Namik's criticism of the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) -- the lead GOAJ entity responsible for regulating Islamic activities -- is particularly severe and tracks with the Embassy's view that the CMB's legitimacy is declining among pious believers (ref b). Namik also told us that the Ministry of National Security (MNS) harasses several people affiliated with his

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NGO; this claim tracks with anecdotal conversations we have had with other clerics and religious NGO activists. GRPO reporting also demonstrates that the MNS is aggressive in uprooting suspect Islamic radicals.

Unofficial Cleric

¶7. (C) Namik told us he still lives in Mashtaga, where he leads prayers at an unofficial mosque. He told us that many people in the villages on the Absheron Peninsula -- a traditionally conservative Shia stronghold (ref c) -- prefer to go to these underground mosques. When asked whether the authorities are able to control these kinds of unregistered mosques, Namik said relations between village elders and local authorities sometimes insulate these communities from central governmental pressure. (We believe Namik is likely overstating the scope of small villages' ability to reach such agreements with local authorities, although the circumstances likely vary per community.)

Anti-Israel and Anti-U.S. Views

¶8. (C) Namik's strident views on the Middle East and U.S. foreign policy suggest his views were shaped by his time in Iran. For example, Namik said he does not recognize Israel's right to exist, supports Hizballah's activities in Lebanon, and supports Hamas' role in the Palestinian territories. Namik is also critical of U.S. foreign policy throughout the Middle East, claiming that U.S. policy is anti-Islamic. While Namik's criticism is sincere, he appeared to relish the opportunity to flaunt his views to an American diplomat. (Namik's foreign policy views are extremely rare in Azerbaijan, where most Azerbaijanis show little interest in Hizballah and have generally positive views of Israel. The Embassy cautions against assuming that all Azerbaijani clerics who have studied in Iran espouse radical views, as we have met several locals who studied in Qom, while rejecting an Iranian-style theocratic system and denouncing Iran's support for terrorism.)

Comment

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¶9. (S/NF) Islamic commentators and the press often tell us about the danger posed by underground clerics who espouse radical religious and/or political views. Despite the volume of noise about this problem, there are few who can identify such clerics or the underground mosques where these imams may lead prayers. The Embassy has sought to get in contact with this strata of clerics.

¶10. (S/NF) The Embassy judges that pockets of radical Muslims exist in Azerbaijan, but they are primarily isolated communities with limited means. GRPO reporting confirms that these pockets exist and are a genuine problem; GRPO reporting will remain our best source of information about these circles. The pockets of radicalism occur in the much broader context of Azerbaijan's generally moderate Islamic communities. While Islamic radicalism is not a serious problem in the short to medium term, the Embassy believes the GOAJ's heavy-handed approach to Islam and the declining legitimacy of the official Islamic structures could open the door to more dangerous long-term developments. We continue to monitor this issue and will provide additional reporting septel.

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